

Debating The Lord's Prayer

Sussex council's public prayer heads for its first court test

Dan Shortridge
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Every Tuesday at 10 a.m., Mike Vincent pushes his chair back and stands up at the front of the Sussex County Council chambers, nodding to his colleagues, also standing. The five council members and four county staffers on the dais bow their heads. Some clasp their hands together.

Then they recite:
Our Father, who art in Heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name ...

The phrases the council members and many in the audience repeat are those of the Lord's Prayer. It is a practice that raised few eyebrows for years, but now faces a federal court challenge from a group of Sussex residents.

The county has argued that the Lord's Prayer is not an exclusively Christian prayer, and its themes are universal; thus, its public recitation by a government body is legal. In a recent court filing, an attorney defending the county wrote: "It is as generic and universal a prayer as can be crafted, inoffensive in its non-denominational textual statements of supplication and belief, and as all-inclusive as a prayer may reasonably be." Some religious historians and pastors disagree.

"It was never intended to be a universal public prayer," said Charles Kammer, a Lutheran minister and professor of religious studies at the College of Wooster, in Ohio. "This prayer is clearly embedded in Christian history, and really doesn't show up anywhere else."

Line by line

The case will face its first hurdle in January, when a federal judge has scheduled oral arguments on the county's motion to dismiss the plaintiffs' suit.

The motion includes citations from the Christian and Jewish Bibles, the Koran, the Book of Mormon and multiple Sikh and Buddhist prayers, contrasting them line by line with the Lord's Prayer to make the argument that its principles are universal and inoffensive.

"In offering the Lord's Prayer, there is no specific call to, or statement of belief in, Jesus Christ, Allah, Yahweh, Ik Onkar, Brahman, Ahura Mazda, Gaia, L. Ron Hubbard, the Baha'i Unfathomable Mystery or any other specific or sectarian deity, prophet or saint," wrote Wilmington attorney Joseph Shannon, representing the county.

But the reason the Lord's Prayer does not invoke Jesus' name, Kammer noted, is its words are said to have been spoken by Jesus during the Sermon on the Mount and recorded by his disciples.

Regardless of whether Christianity is invoked in the prayer, it nevertheless is a fundamental part of Christian worship, said Stephen Lahey, an associate professor of classics and religious studies at the University of Nebraska. He said it can't be separated from that tradition, or disassembled into pieces.

"The God yo

u pray to [in the Lord's Prayer] is the God that helped the Jews," Lahey said. "That is under no circumstances the same as the god that some Buddhists would understand, or the god that different Hindus understand."

Test set in 1983

And, he added, the intent of the people praying matters the most. The prayer has no meaning if the people reciting it don't believe.

"The intentional aspect of to whomever the words are addressed makes all the difference," Lahey said. "Just saying the words doesn't do it. You have to be directed at the inward level, you have to have the attention of the soul directed toward the divine."

The county argues that the prayer is permitted under the seminal church-state separation ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court -- *Marsh v. Chambers* -- because it is not used to proselytize and neither favors nor disparages any religion.

The county contends its case is not similar to the school-board prayer case in the Indian River School District -- now being appealed to the high court by the board after a federal appeals court panel ruled against the district -- but more like the case in *Marsh*.

In that 1983 case, the Supreme Court found that Nebraska's hiring of a Christian clergyman to deliver prayers at the start of legislative sessions was legal: "In light of the history, there can be no doubt that the practice of opening legislative sessions with prayer has become part of the fabric of our society," the justices ruled. "The facts that a clergyman of only one denomination has been selected by the Nebraska Legislature for 16 years, that the chaplain is paid at public expense, and that the prayers are in the Judeo-Christian tradition do not serve to invalidate Nebraska's practice."

'Agglomeration'

Because the Lord's Prayer is not proselytizing, Sussex's practice is permissible under the standard set in the *Marsh* case, the county contends.

"The Lord's Prayer is an agglomeration of foundational themes common to nearly every monotheistic religion, articulating no tenets specific to Christianity, but each of which finds expression in other faiths," Shannon wrote.

That is not an opinion shared by all religious leaders in Sussex County.

"It is implicitly part of the Christian tradition," said the Rev. D. Michael Smith, pastor of the Unitarian Universalists of Southern Delaware. He said the county's analysis of the prayer and comparison to other faiths doesn't make sense.

"You can't do that. The Lord's Prayer is special to Christianity," Smith said. "Even if you did draw similarities from other prayers, it's kind of 'So what?' It'd still be an issue of church and state separation."

The Rev. George Blasick, pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Seaford, agreed the Lord's Prayer is inherently Christian. In his faith, he noted, the opening of the prayer is uttered by Jesus, the son of God.

"The context moves it beyond what other faiths would hold, what other faiths would express as the essence of God," Blasick wrote in an email, while declining to address the larger controversy because he wasn't familiar with the issues. "All that is asked after the opening address ['Our Father'] moves toward very specific theological ideas ... not universal principles."

The Rev. Don Schaefer, pastor of the Lutheran Church of Our Savior in Rehoboth Beach, said prayer shouldn't be mandated, for the simple reason that it has a deep meaning to believers -- simply repeating the words isn't praying.

"When you pray together in a group, the unspoken is that when you're saying the words together, you all agree on what those words mean," Schaefer said. He said the issue for people who oppose the practice is likely not the content of the prayer, but the prayers themselves.

"Even atheists could probably agree that the prayer has 'universal principles,' " he said. "Things like asking for forgiveness, protection and sustenance are an acknowledgement that we are dependent upon the provision of something beyond ourselves."

'Off-putting'

Supporters of the public prayer, including former Councilman Dale Dukes, a Laurel Democrat, have said the Founding Fathers also prayed, and that such practices are needed now more than ever. Though the council is now controlled 4-1 by Republicans, the prayers were carried out for many years under a 3-2 Democratic majority.

The lawsuit was brought by four Sussex residents, including a retired Lutheran pastor, represented by the watchdog group Americans United for Separation of Church and State, of Washington, D.C. The group said it wrote letters to the county complaining about the practice in 2008 and 2009, but received no response.

Other observers say governmental prayers are insulting to America's diverse population, and that it's possible to find prayers that don't offend any part of the public.

"For our population, it is off-putting to hear a Christian prayer recited in a public or governmental setting," said Edmund Case, an attorney who founded InterfaithFamily.com, a

nonprofit that works with interfaith couples where one partner is Jewish. "It heightens divisions and leaves the non-majority person feeling like an outsider."

Kammer said there's a certain theological irony to the Lord's Prayer being at the center of a dispute about public prayer.

"In the setup to this, Jesus is criticizing all these persons who are standing around praying in public. He wants them to know that praying in public represents a kind of religious pride and calls into question the sincerity of the prayer," Kammer said, quoting the Book of Matthew: "'But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.' "